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For the most part these stories are about events which seem bizarre and fantastic. The manner in which characters react or fail to react to the events should, if the stories succeed, convey to the reader a distinct uneasiness and anxiety. While the surface of the stories seem to challenge rationalistic schemes of order, their creation is motivated by an intuition that is not altogether irrational. The Middle Arm is concerned with what might be glibly termed "primal suspicions".

THE MIDDLE ARM

by

George H. Lynn

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the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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APPROVAL SHEET

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INTRODUCTION

On my sixth birthday my father took my sister and me to the fair. There, in a side show, we saw a man with only one arm that grew from the center of his chest. The hand on the arm had six fingers which wiggled and flexed. I laughed at the man because the arm looked silly, but my dumb sister cried so loudly that we had to go home.

THE VARSOL INCIDENT

One morning around ten o'clock Lewis Bigalow stepped out to collect his mail. As he tipped the lid and reached inside the box, a scream came from the house next door. By the shrillness Lewis judged it to be a woman's scream but an instant later Arley Jenkins burst out the screen door howling in agony. His white pajamas with big blue flowers were afire. Arley ran to the sidewalk waving his knobby arms, then turned downhill and came staggering past where Lewis stood on the portico with his hand in the mailbox. The old man was engulfed by fire; even his long white hair flamed like a wick, and his burning face wore an expression of disbelief. He rolled his eyes toward Lewis, pursed his lips as if for a kiss, and gave out another terrible scream. Then he rounded the hedge and disappeared.

Arley's wife was now on the porch, squawking and stamping her fat, bare feet. Each time she yelled for help she ripped the bodice of her nightgown. Mr. York emerged from his house across the street and Lewis removed his hand from the mailbox.

York had a rose colored quilt slung over his shoulder, and a rolled newspaper in his hand. The quilt dragged the ground as he pursued Arley behind the hedge. Lewis followed, feeling foolish in his bathrobe and floppy slippers.

People came from all around the neighborhood. Some had quilts and blankets. There was a middle-aged lady with bleached hair and eyebrows whom Lewis had never seen. She wore red and white bermuda shorts and carried a bucket of water.

By the time Arley was chased down and extinguished there was a sizable crowd. The people milled around and talked until the ambulance came. Several neighbors met there for the first time. A black toy chihuahua with bulging eyes darted among the crowd, yapping and sniffing ankles.

York worked his way to Lewis's side and said hello. As they watched two attendants load the smoking body onto a litter, York poked Lewis in the ribs with his thumb.

"You see?" he whispered. "Did I tell you? It was the Varsol, the old fool." He thrust his face near Lewis's and smiled. Without knowing why, Lewis nodded, then turned away. He hated York's red eyes and the clear grease he used on his hair. Now, to make things worse, York's name would be in the paper.

Lewis aimed a kick at the noisy chihuahua and missed. Then he walked to the hedge to watch the ambulance careen around a corner, and decided York was crazy.

LARGER AND BETTER THINGS

Several days ago I made my first visit to the home of our new landlord, a Mr. Fabus York. He was much as I expected; from the moment I shook his miserable hand I despised him. He is a repulsive egotist, the sort who is obviously insecure. My wife Wilma, who handled the renting of our house, did not exaggerate in her amusing descriptions.

York is a small man; I guess him to be around fifty. He has queer red eyes and wears therapedic tennis slippers. His hands, which are mottled with rust-like scales, tremble and sometimes scurry across his lap like crabs. He becomes agitated with their movement and scours the back of one with the knuckles of the other, a very distracting habit. Once, during our conversation in which he bragged and boasted in a desperate manner, he caught me eyeing this self abuse and blushed. I did not wish to offend this man upon whom we now depended, so I inquired politely about his scales, feigning a scientific curiosity. This proved to be the wrong tack and embarrassed him more, but he replied that the scales itched. He tried clumsily to hide them under a sofa pillow. After a moment he excused himself and went upstairs to get the lease, an agreement which he had insisted I sign as well as Wilma, obviously a ruse to look me over. I decided to explore the huge, dark living room, vowing to avoid these visits in the

future by sending Wilma with the rent. Mailing the check across the street would be obvious.

In the darkest corner of the room I discovered an enormous aquarium. The tank was dry, its expansive bottom still layered with brown pebbles and brightly colored shale. A delicate blue and yellow castle nestled in the shale. Beside the tank, scattered about on the window ledge, were assorted pieces of filter equipment, dusty from disuse.

When York returned he found me admiring the castle's finely sculptured battlements and turrets, and tiny mysterious windows. I complimented the castle and York radiated pleasure. He told me that the piece had been created especially for that aquarium by a famous artist in Arholie. York swelled his puny chest and swore that his aquarium had been the finest in the state, much admired and envied by educated personages. The collection had included many rare and expensive specimens. Every person of any social distinction in St. Marie had, at one time or another, visited the York home to gaze at the exotic gems that glided and flitted with such grace and bearing through the warm waters.

As the old man spoke these words his pride seemed to fade a bit, and he fell silent, seemingly lost in his reminiscences. I prepared for more boastful lies and watched the hands run about.

"I could not have realized!" he blurted suddenly; he commenced to scour the hands unmercifully. "We do things

without suspecting. How could I have known?"

He looked to me imploringly, his eyes crimson. Taken by surprise I merely cleared my throat and nodded. This gesture was sufficient to calm him and with a shudder he launched again into his story, his voice quivering with emotion. Under those circumstances what could I do but sit and listen, hoping for a chance to escape?

Some months ago it seems he purchased an extremely rare and expensive fresh water specimen, a fish of a genus he could not recall, but which he described as a miniature catfish. The dealer, a fellow previously unknown to York, had produced impressive credentials, and convinced York that this fish would be the crowning addition to his already famous collection. The dealer assured York that it was quite regular to mix exotic fresh waters with the tropicals, the two or three other existing miniature catfish being exhibited similarly in distant parts of the world.

The purchase was completed and, for a time, the new fish was indeed the hit of St. Marie. With his wife's assistance York gave a lavish party to celebrate the culmination of a brilliantly conceived work of art, the now complete York fish collection. Even the mayor and his cripple nephew were there, and the governor sent a gracious note of congratulation and regret at not being able to attend.

For weeks York enjoyed the glow of adoration and esteem. Then one weekend he and his wife made a short trip to Boaz to

visit a sick cousin. They left the big house empty, save for the fish, locked securely, and departed late one Friday afternoon. Upon their return the following Sunday afternoon they discovered that the new fish had grown to a size similar to that of an ordinary channel-cat, and that the big fish was now the tank's sole occupant. Dazed and bewildered, York had dropped to his knees and for several frenzied seconds searched the carpet about the aquarium base, poking under the sofa with his hat. Finally Mrs. York succeeded in shaking him to his sense, whereupon the old man flew into a rage. He seized the unlucky fish from the aquarium, flung it wiggling upon the carpet, and, despite his wife's attempts to dissuade him, proceeded to stomp flat the very last specimen of the famous York fish collection. When he finished his story, the old man sat limp and wasted on the velvet sofa, his head bowed in apparent shame. I was tempted to ask if he ever tried to contact the suspect dealer, but seeing the old fool was near tears, I simply took the lease from his hand, signed both copies, and left him there.

That night, our first night in the new house, Wilma, my small son Bobby, and I sat around the kitchen table and had a great time. I uncorked a bottle of Chianti and we discussed the house and our demented landlord, whom we had seen looking across the street toward our house from an upstairs window. Wilma said that she figured he would watch every night. This brought a good laugh, as did my account of the catfish incident. We were all in unusually good humor, realizing, I suppose, that

now that we had moved from our cramped little apartment into this big fine house, our lives were bound to change. Even little Bobby, who is only five, laughed and laughed and drank a little wine.

AB'S NIGHT

"there, some unknown but still reasoning thing"

MOBY DICK

Ab wakes; the house envelopes him. It is dark; he has the sensation of being swallowed. He fumbles about the table, desperately; his fingers close on the goose-neck lamp. Weak illumination flashes, fades, claws ragged shadows out of the darkness. The shadows warn of a presence, a menace. Previously inanimate things, the radio, a chair, the dresser, begin to squat and hover. They leer, and mock his perception. His breathing becomes labored, and he begins to sweat.

Ab's eyes move to the bedroom wall, to the rifle, and find comfort. The chrome bolt gleams unnaturally in the yellow light.

Stepping up onto the bed, deftly balancing himself left, then right on the yielding springs, he lifts the Enfield from its rack. He fondles the weapon, sliding his trembling fingers up and down the smooth blond stock. The bolt snicker-snacks open and shut with a piston movement of his arm, as he tests the smoothly functioning action. Its fidelity seems perfect. Ab grips the rifle barrel in both hands, and, using the two-piece stock as a ram, bashes the glass from his bedroom window.

Ab pads across Martin's vacant lot, then turns into an alley. Breathing is effortless now and his vision is merciless. He moves with confidence; his purpose is clearly determined. Gravel crunches beneath his feet and he moves more stealthily. As he walks, he loops his left arm around the enfield, wedging it into his armpit. Then he loads five rounds of soft-point ammunition into a stacked, ten shot clip. He switches the rifle to his left hand and smacks the clip into place, just forward the trigger guard. He squeezes the rifle, and grins.

He pauses behind a huge white house that looms up like an iceberg. Music drifts out a second story window. Human forms glide past the translucent shades. Tricks. Distortions. Ab will not be easily deceived.

He continues crossing an empty street at the end of the alley. A narrow path leads him into a clump of trees. Soon he emerges from the trees, and stands in a small clearing. Before him a steeply inclined bank stretches thirty yards to the parking lot of the Dixie Cinema. The Cinema's neon lights cast blue and yellow waves across the black pavement.

Ab lies down in the grass and cradles the rifle. He squints through the aperture sights. There is no moon, no stars, but the buzzing neon provides ample light for his aim.

In front of the Cinema, precisely in the middle, stands a tall, glass encompassed ticket booth. Inside the booth an old lady works, bobbing up and down and punching buttons.

Occasionally a pasteboard ticket pops out of a slot located just below the money hole.

A man and a woman move in front of the booth, bringing themselves into Ab's sight picture. The man shoves paper through the money hole and the lady in the booth bobs and punches, her sequinned dress corruscating in the colored light. The booth spits a ticket with a hum and clang of machinery. Then the couple move to one side of the booth and the Cinema opens a rectangular eye to admit them.

In the distance, a car horn bellows and a dog barks. Ab wets his lips and squints, framing the old lady's head in the circular rear sight. Then he slowly raises the slender front sight blade into the circle, until its tip obscures the lady's head. The head bobs, appears near the edge of the circle; Ab adjusts. He lets out half a breath, and slowly squeezes the rifle trigger. The remaining breath erupts from his throat in a squeal when the rifle fires, kicks back and up against his shoulder. The report booms across the parking lot to the brick Cinema wall, and rebounds to Ab on the hill. Specks of white fire whirr before his eyes. He blinks, rubs his eyes, and peers toward the target.

Most of the glass booth is gone, shattered. Only the steel frame supports remain, and a few slivers of glass, stretching up like fingers. There is no sign of the old lady.

The theater eyes blink open, then shut. They open again and a trickle of people start out, then a flood. Most

of them crowd around the rubble of the booth. A few women run screaming into the black parking lot.

Ab lays the rifle in the grass and rolls over on his back. He plucks a blade of grass and chews it. A thin, hysterical wail rises in the distance. Presently, it is joined by several other sirens, all rising and falling in panic stricken chorus. The whines probe the darkness like frantic searchlights.

Ab lies on his back, listening to the sirens, and grins up at the starless sky.

OUTSIDE THE DOOR

I

For twelve years Lucas lived alone on Leeds mountain. On the day ranger McAdams broke his vow and came to the mountain top, Lucas saw the dogs lurking near his cabin on the perimeter of the trees. Although McAdams believed, and feared, Lucas had always doubted until that day.

Leeds mountain rose improbably in an area of relatively flat land. Lucas built his cabin in a pock-like clearing some thirty yards below the mountain summit. He purchased his supplies from McAdams, the local forest ranger whose steel observation tower stood four miles southeast on a high ridge. Lucas hated the people of Trussville and never ventured down into the town at the foot of the mountain.

To the citizen's of Trussville, it seemed odd, even comical that the hermit's cabin should stand on a higher plane than the forest ranger's tower. Certainly a superior view might have been achieved by erecting the tower on the spot where Lucas built his cabin, and this easily done because McAdams appointment preceeded Lucas in the area by several years. But the dogs had impressed upon the ranger a fear which approached obsession. Religiously he avoided the higher elevations, never crossing the stream that ran near the old logging road.

Actually the tower was at little disadvantage, and

could have been placed most anywhere. Wild game was scarce and there was no hunting on the mountain. McAdams blamed this chronic shortage on the packs of wild dogs which he claimed infested the mountain forests. The dogs were vicious killers, he said, and shortly after his appointment he declared a bounty on wild dogs, but few of the lazy Trussville hunters participated. Among the few who did, not a single claim was registered. Some of the hunters began to whisper that the ranger was crazy, and make jokes about him. Before long the bounty was retracted. With no hunting and few storms, there were never any forest fires.

The relationship between Lucas and McAdams was initiated as a practical necessity. The provision arrangement saved Lucas a twenty mile trip into the despised Trussville, and such a journey would have been well beyond the capabilities of his aged mare. The ranger received a small commission as middle man, a welcome addition to his meager salary.

After several trips to the tower Lucas began to stay overnight with the ranger before returning with his goods to his cabin the next morning. These evenings were pleasant for the men. They ate corned beef and guzzled McAdams' store-bought whiskey. They often talked about the mountain, things they had seen in the forest, and sometimes McAdams would talk about his bizarre religion. Inevitably, when this subject was discussed the ranger would tell about the dogs. Lucas was fascinated by the strange ceremonies and visions, and he indulged McAdams in

his ravings about the dogs.

They became good friends, though Lucas was irked by the ranger's fear of the mountain top. Often Lucas would try to coax him into returning a visit. McAdams always said no, that he would never set foot past the stream. Lucas would chide and cuss to no avail.

In spite of this, Lucas did seem to have a genuine fondness for McAdams; if not fondness, then certainly a deliberate curiosity.

Then, in August of his fifty-sixth year, Lucas sent a letter to his cousin Fisher Bearden, a young school teacher in Trussville. This represented Lucas' first direct communication with the people of Trussville in fifteen years. He had met this young cousin only once, during a visit to the ranger's tower. Upon that brief, accidental encounter, Lucas had immediately despised Fisher.

The letter extended an invitation for a week-end visit. It told of the old man's need for assistance in repairing his cabin roof, and offered Fisher a chance to fish a nearby stream. It also mentioned the declining health of Lucas' horse, and his interest in perhaps having Fisher act as a purchasing agent in obtaining another.

Fisher was amazed by the invitation, having sensed the old man's hostility during their meeting, but very pleased. He showed the letter to his wife. They discussed the prospect, and both agreed that it all seemed appealing. Although the

letter had no return address, Fisher wrote to Lucas in care of Ranger McAdams, expressing gratitude and acceptance. There was no way of Fisher knowing that McAdams had relented and gone to the cabin, or that the last trip had been too much and Lucas' horse was dead.

II

At six a. m. a steady rain was falling. For Fisher it was the beginning of an unseasonably wet day, the third such day in the same week.

The alarm woke him from a restless, apprehensive sleep. He went into the tiny kitchen and fixed himself a light breakfast of Wheaties, toast, and coffee. After breakfast he dressed quickly, briefly enjoying the feel of denim against his legs. He fumbled with the fake pearl buttons on his new western shirt, then pulled on his new leather hunting boots, lacing them hurriedly and missing several holes.

In the bedroom his wife still slept. Fisher re-set the alarm for nine as she had requested, and then quietly carried his suitcase and fishing rig out into the warm rain.

Downtown Trussville consisted of a McClellan's Dime Store, a small department store, two cafe-beer joints, an "Easy Loan" Finance Company, a large feed store, and a mail order Sears Roebuck. The courthouse-jail had burned in June and was being rebuilt, and the post office sat back on Jay Street where new residents had trouble finding it.

Main Street was still deserted at six-thirty. Fisher sat in his Ford coupe, waiting for Trussville's solitary traffic signal to turn green. The signal operated all night. There was no traffic after one o'clock, yet the light dutifully hummed and blinked through its regular sequence above the empty intersection.

Fisher felt uncomfortable waiting alone before the useless signal; he cursed the town government, not being sure who was in charge of traffic lights. "Probably nobody," he decided.

He switched on his radio and deftly tuned it to a Birmingham Station. The light changed and he drove on, whistling "Wabash Cannon Ball" and trying to reconcile the song's rhythm to the cadence of his beating windshield wipers.

He beeped his horn at Sam Hogan asleep in the front seat of the town's patrol car. The car was hidden in the narrow alley between the feed store and Sears. Fisher grinned, but his grin faded slightly. It felt odd to be the only one awake.

Turning left at Hoke Street he crossed the double railroad tracks and passed Weather's hardware. He drove slowly past the high school, turned out for the summer months. The big building seemed to be sleeping, yet its window eyes were open and hollow. Somewhere deep within the concrete and tile, Fisher heard a phone ringing.

He daubed at the condensation on his windshield with a handkerchief. Once cleared it began to fog again. He cracked his ventilator.

The outskirts of town slid past. Before him, hulking over the diminutive highway, the mountain towered into the solid clouds.

He knew it was only the dreary weather that made the mountain seem threatening. The forecast for tomorrow was partly cloudy with no rain. Yes, tomorrow would be another story.

He drove with two fingers hooked to the bottom of the steering wheel, and listened to the hissing of his tires on the watery pavement. He envisioned himself in water, wading in a beautiful mountain stream, playing a flashing trout, fly rod bent . . .

He supposed too that Lucas would have many fine mountain yarns. He visualized himself and the old man reclining in hammocks strung across a big porch. They exchanged stories; their cigarettes . . . , no, their pipes would glow as they smoked Lucas' special rich tobacco, punctuating silent lapses as they, contentedly, listened to the sounds of the forest. He felt in his windbreaker for his pipe.

After fifteen minutes the highway commenced its exhausting curves, bending back upon itself, penetrating clefts in tall clay banks. The shadowy forest squeezed against both sides of the highway. It wedged the low sky into a pencil strip, and, everywhere, the vegetation stolidly accepted the persistent rain.

From time to time, as the twisting course of the highway allowed, he studied the glistening tangle of plants. Somehow

the drenched scene made him think of the ocean. Once he almost drowned in the ocean, when he was a child . . .

Distracted, Fisher allowed the ford to enter a curve too high, and the car began to skid toward the road shoulder. He corrected easily and remembered the pull of the rip tide that had sucked him into deep water. He slowed a bit and resolved to concentrate on driving and to admire mountain scenery later.

Several times though his glances returned to the woods. It seemed the trees would drown. "It will be different tomorrow," he thought.

The mile of unpaved road gave him several bad moments, but at eight o'clock he turned off of the road into a clearing. By this time the rain had diminished to a vaporous mist.

The cabin was situated no more than ten yards from the edge of the trees, placed oddly on a fairly steep incline, so that when Fisher killed his engine and peered out his water-beaded windshield, he actually looked down on the cabin. The high side of the structure nearest him rested on concrete blocks, while the opposite side extended precariously into space. This half was supported by six foot logs propped vertically in the ground like pier legs.

He got out, stood by the car to inspect the place more thoroughly. The windows on the visible side were lightless, and canted, he noticed, at an upward angle, designed to open inward from the top and hang by small chains. In their glass

he could see his distorted image. When he shifted his stance the image shattered and this made him nervous. He felt an unreasonable tension of . . . perhaps, isolation. He had expected a greeting of some sort in spite of this early arrival, and had revved his engine a few times to make certain his presence was noted. But the place looked deserted. From one corner, of the steep cabin roof, rainwater thumped into a rain barrel.

He sensed that he was intruding, breaking into something indisposed to outsiders. He considered returning to Trussville, to his wife, his dry familiar home, but then he heard Lucas' first muttered command.

"Over here, cousin."

Fisher squinted through the mist toward the dark porch, chilled by the absurd notion that the cabin had spoken.

"On the porch. Here."

He saw a squat figure extract itself from the shadows and gesture.

"Don't stand there gawking in the rain," it said.

Embarrassed, Fisher grinned and waved. He hastily collected his things from the trunk and descended the incline.

III

The interior of the cabin was relatively bare. No rugs on the floor, no pictures and, contrary to what Fisher had foolishly expected, no hunting trophies adorned the walls.

A crude table sat in the center of the room. In one corner a brass bed supported a sagging feather mattress. Beside the bed a Washington-State apple crate turned on end served as a table for a kerosene lamp that washed the room in feeble yellow light. A straight backed rocking chair waited beside the crate.

Except for an army cot and an empty nail keg, these were the room's only furnishings.

When they sat down for an early lunch, Fisher used the keg for a stool. Lucas had built a cooking fire in the fireplace and the heat made the room muggy. The cabin windows steamed up and began to sweat.

Lucas dished the hot beans from the kettle into tin plates, then pulled a large hunk of corned beef from a salt barrel on the porch. He put the corned beef on the table.

"It ain't much," he said, wiping his nose on his forearm, "It ain't fancy, but I stay fat on it."

"It's fine, Lucas, fine. Real mountain food." Fisher laughed.

Lucas grunted humorlessly and thumped two wooden mugs on the table. "You like cider, cousin?"

"Sure," Fisher lied, "Me and my old man used to make our own when I lived up in Anniston."

Lucas drew out a gallon jug and poured Fisher's mug full of the translucent liquid. Then he filled his own.

When the old man sat down his gray sweatshirt rode up

above his navel, producing a wide smile of hairy flesh. Fisher chewed the salty corned beef, trying not to look at the old man's feet. The toenails were very long and colored yellowish black.

And he didn't recall from the first meeting Lucas being so short. A mountain man should be tall and stringy like Ranger McAdams, but Lucas stood five-six or seven and looked like someone who raised hogs.

Fisher shoved the beans to one side and tried the cider. It was viscous and sweetish.

Two glasses made him drunk. He became talkative, running on about how he admired Lucas for going it alone, confronting life on his own terms and so on.

Lucas ate ravenously and talked little, answering a few direct questions, ignoring many. Fisher droned endlessly, attempting several jokes and laughing alone. Finally Lucas interrupted a long detailed lie about the cider operation by saying it was time for his nap. He suggested Fisher also get some sleep.

Fisher wound his watch and struggled with his boots. Then he relaxed on the cot, intending to take a short nap. His legs were too long for the cot and he kept propping them on the nail keg and they kept slipping off.

Once asleep, he did not fully wake until the next day. Sometime during the lengthy sleep the dreams began. Fisher lay naked, staked spread-eagle to the ground

in the center of an oval field. The field grew thick with bright yellow goldenrod. A fetid wind worried the stalks and their rustling permeated the dense, humid air.

By pressing his cheek to the ground he could see through the maze of stalks, into the edge of the forest. Ten or fifteen gray shapes crouched there among the serrated shadows. The shapes began to move, slinking from their cover into the field. Sunlight changed gray to silver as they darted across the open gap between the woods and the flowers.

Fascinated, Fisher studied their approach. They inched cautiously toward his spot, bending and breaking the fragile plants. They skimmed their underparts against the ground and a fine yellow powder rose in puffs from beneath them. The powder accumulated, expanded, became an acrid fog.

A queer sensual anxiety gripped Fisher as he saw himself hunted from a remote, unthreatened perspective, yet simultaneously, he was there as . . .

The dogs ringed him now, sidling round and round in a constricting circle. One bared his black teeth and nipped hungrily at another's flank. Their eyes were white, their gray bodies scrawny and mottled by burrs. Fisher could see wiry rib patterns beneath their flesh.

Then, directly above him in the yellow cloud, the fat face of Lucas, intent, triumphant. The face descended, slowly, until Fisher's body surged.

In the expanse it was impossible to determine exactly

where the dream occurred. When Fisher woke, however, his watch had stopped at two o'clock. He attributed his violent headache and mental torpor to the cider.

A light rain spattered against the closed windows. The room was suffocatingly warm. The feather bed lay empty and Lucas was not in the cabin.

Fisher rubbed his forehead and puzzled over his watch's failure. He remembered winding it vaguely. "God-damned Timex," he grumbled as he tapped his fingers against the crystal.

He supposed that he had been asleep for about an hour. The dream had seemed short and now he felt worse than before.

He found Lucas outside, up the hill, leaning against the car, apparently inspecting a front fender.

"What are you doing, Lucas?"

"Lookin' at this fender." Lucas glanced up and Fisher saw that his eyes were the color of raw iron. "How you feeling now, cousin?"

"Pretty rocky. That cider packs a wallop." Fisher rubbed the back of his neck. "What time is it? My god-damned watch stopped."

"Don't keep track of the hour up here. Ain't no use."

"I'd like to set my watch," Fisher said as he got into the car. He switched on the radio. There was nothing but static. "Must be around 2:30," he decided and scooted off the front seat.

"Come around here," Lucas said. Fisher circled the

front of the Ford, admiring its teardrop shape and the oval chrome propeller in the wrap-around grille.

"Looky here." The old man indicated the fender. A long jagged tear creased the waxed luster. The cut resembled one made in a tin can by a can opener.

"Was it like that when you drove up?" Lucas ran a long dirty fingernail along the cut. Something failed in Fisher's reaction. He looked at the fender, dazed.

"No . . . no it wasn't like that."

"Musta been."

"No." He struggled, "I thought you were alone up here."

"Dunno," Lucas said calmly. "Don't worry none about your fender, cousin. I'll buy you a new 'un."

"I don't understand."

"Forget it. Go do your fishin' this mornin' and we'll fix the roof this afternoon."

"This afternoon? This is afternoon."

"Naw, cousin. You had a long nap." Lucas spat a glob of tobacco juice and it glistened on the fender like a slug.

IV

His mind came and receded, blotting out any awareness of much that may have occurred. In the rain, the solid cover that shielded the mountain from time, Fisher moved listlessly. One thing: he obeyed the old man readily. Decisions were at

times so difficult, and Lucas always pointed him along.

Walking in the forest in the appointed direction, Fisher had not been aware of the fly rod he carried until he had dropped it and examined the fiberglass, trying to recall his mission.

The woods were quiet. The rain ceased momentarily but the sky, visible in ragged patches through the tree-tops, remained the same color as the interior of a thermos bottle. Despite the dreary weather, bright colors were abundant.

He wandered along a path, touching flowers and trees, oblivious to the wrongness. The colors were too rich, too vivid for the drab light refractions. The color vibrated and breathed, generating a luminescence from within. It was over-ripe and bursting.

Then the stream glided before him. Murky and lifeless, it emitted a stench.

In places, cream-colored stones broke the black surface, their sides slick with a brilliant slime that moved in changing patterns of purple and green. The chiaroscuro was hypnotic. Fisher became nauseated and leaned against a tree to vomit. The tree, though healthy looking, crumbled under his weight.

After the sickness he felt unusually lucid. He tossed the useless rod into the stream and watched it sucked away. As he retraced his way back to the cabin, he wondered about leaving.

They repaired the roof, or rather Fisher did. Lucas stood on the hill by the car and watched. Afterwards Fisher walked toward the mountain top.

A bald spot marked the summit, and there he found the still fresh grave, its mound high and damp. He wiped the water from his eyes and handled the crude wreath, recognizing the goldenrod, but it had no importance now. They were brown and wilted, finished. He put the wreath back on the nail. The marker was peculiar, a five-pointed star.

When he returned to the cabin Lucas was stirring a kettle of beans over the low fire.

"Did you find his truck?" he asked without turning. Fisher could feel the old man's smile.

"No." He hunched his shoulders. "I saw a grave."

"His truck's down in the holler." The old man giggled and shook his head. Then he tasted the beans, cussed, and added something from a tin can.

When he sat down he smiled again. "Yes sir," he said, "Yes sir."

Fisher nodded and accepted the extended food.

After supper Lucas took a paper sack from behind the crate and went outside. Fisher trailed after him, going to his hands and knees twice on the slippery bank. When he finally reached the top, Lucas was completing the ring of gray powder around the Ford. Then he drew three spokes, smoothing and shaping them with his big toe, two from the rear bumper and

one from the chrome propeller, that extended to the circle.

"What's all that for?" Fisher watched the rain make tiny volcanoes in the powder.

"I'm making sure nobody fools with your car."

"What's that gray stuff?"

Lucas scratched his foot. "Rat poison," he said and laughed. "Rat poison." He giggled and nodded as he slouched back down the hill. Fisher stayed by the car, experimentally poking his boot toe in the powder.

V

In the second dream he watched the goldenrod whip in the field. The hard wind carried the scent of man sweat. Musky shapes rubbed against his taut body. He coiled, remained immobile until he felt a sharp pain in his flank, then moved, scurrying across the naked swath and into the wildly swinging flowers. Thin stalk shadows criss-crossed his muzzle.

Driven by a fierce, dry hunger, he crept forward, drawing courage from the number around him. As he moved he whimpered and fawned.

Through the wiry maze he saw the old man staked to the earth. The yellow licked into the tangle of black hair on his belly. Slowly converging, the pack began to circle.

When Fisher woke the Ford was demolished; mashed into a flat ruin. Everything was broken. The V-8 engine had been plucked from the car body and ground into junk. Part of the

warped steering wheel protruded through the shattered windshield, and glass splinters glistened in the rain, rubber tissues curling on their edges.

He leaned against the banister and watched Lucas poke through the wreckage. Actually he felt nothing except a mild concern about how he would eventually return to Trussville.

After a while Lucas came back up the steps carrying a hubcap. Fisher placed his hand on the old man's arm.

"What are you gonna do with that?"

"Thought it would look good on the wall."

"How will I get home, Lucas?"

Lucas shrugged the hand off and spat tobacco on the hubcap. Together they watched it dribble down the mirror surface.

"Take you as far as the highway tomorrow."

"Lucas?" Fisher gaped for a moment, then remembered.

"I have these dreams . . . "

Lucas shrugged again. "Go rest now. You got a ways to go yet."

VI

During the night he was awakened by the sound of a soft scratching at the cabin door. He listened carefully. The door rattled frantically on its hinges, and the wooden belt started to splinter. He looked over and found Lucas in the rocking chair, illuminated by the full roaring flame of

the kerosene lamp. The old man sat naked, staring at the door. In his dangling right hand, between his thumb and first two fingers, he gripped a set of shiny dentures. When he saw that Fisher was looking, the old man grinned, displaying two slick ridges of gum.

Then, extending his right hand toward Fisher, he playfully clacked the false teeth.

EVERYTHING CLOSES ON WEDNESDAY

I

On a Wednesday morning in front of the Hokes Bluff bus station a frail lady in a baggy dress stood talking to a boy who obviously paid her no mind. One of the lady's stockings lay about her boney ankle in a soft roll. A short distance away at the loading curb a greyhound bus idled its engine.

The boy was bored with his mother's talk and anxious to be away. He scraped his feet on the concrete, looked around, and scratched his ears. His inattentiveness distressed his mother and she began to yell. To make her point she gesticulated wildly with a small whisk broom. She had realized that the bus would take her son away, and that in one hour it would be noon; in one hour all the stores would close, all the shopkeepers would lock their doors, cover their store windows and go home. She began to poke at her son's stomach with her broom, determined that he should heed her warning.

The boy shielded his stomach from her thrusts with a comic book. He placed his free hand above his eyes and watched the heavy cumulous clouds that congregated, then separated in the hazy sky. Their tops were white and gold, their bottoms gray-brown like dishwater. He sucked at a tooth and finally groaned, satisfied that his mother's chattering would never end. She seemed frantic now; tiny flecks of foam began to appear at the corners of her mouth.

The greyhound became impatient and honked its horn. This startled the lady and she dropped her broom. As she bent to retrieve it she discovered her fallen stocking. Her son quickly grabbed up his suitcase and boarded the bus. The door unfolded and sighed behind him, sealing him in.

He found a window seat on the station side and sat down. Suddenly his mother's face appeared mashed against the window. Her eyes bulged and her mouth worked soundlessly. She rained a patter of blows against the glass with her broom and tiny fist. Her son motioned for her to stand away.

The bus pulled away from the curb, sucking the black straw hat from the lady's head. She swiped at the hat with her free hand but a timely gust of wind plucked it away and hurled it off down the street. The lady stood on tip-toe and drew her hand above her head, as if she meant to fling the whisk broom after the fugitive hat.

II

The ride seemed interminable. Reading the comic gave Walley a headache. For a time he tried to admire the landscapes, but there was little to see. Field after field of charred corn, hundreds of dilapidated barns. The summer had been very dry. The countryside was parched.

Two negro men sat in the seats behind Walley. One was fat, the other thin. The fat negro sucked and mouthed a foul cigar, making farting noises with his lips. The skinny

negro told loud boastful stories about his many operations, giving details of the risky removal of a goiter, an infected kidney and a hairy mole. He bragged loudest about a lung removal. "Six hours on the table" he hissed and smirked. The fat man yawned and nodded.

The bragging disgusted Walley and the cigar smell aggravated his headache. He tried to shut out the skinny man's voice by thinking about his Uncle's chicken farm. "A beautiful place in the summer," Uncle Fred always said. "A big red barn, acres of green grass and white chickens all over." Many times Fred had coaxed Walley and his mother to visit, realizing they must be very lonely since Walley's father died.

And it seemed a pity that Walley's mother was unable to go with him on this visit. Her job at the factory was so time consuming that she could not get away. Of this Walley was secretly pleased. For the first time in his life he faced the exciting prospect of solitary adventure. He knew it was time he traveled alone.

Finally the bus driver pulled the bus to the roadside and announced "BOAZ". On his way rearward Walley paused to get a look at the negroes. The fat one was asleep; a trickle of tobacco juice had dried in one corner of his mouth. The skinny negro glared at Walley and stretched his neck defiantly. Again the driver yelled BOAZ and turned to give Walley an impatient stare. Walley stepped out and down onto the blacktop.

The bus engine snarled, the skinny negro hissed from the bus window, bared his rotten teeth, and then the greyhound bus was gone.

III

Walley stood alone at a crossroads. In four directions the blacktop receded from him, narrowing and blending into the circular horizon. All around the fields were charred and empty. The cumulous had finally formed a solid cover that seemed to glow with a copperish sheen.

Walley cussed and spat on the road. His Uncle Fred was nowhere in sight. He should have been waiting in his truck. Walley remembered Uncle Fred saying that there would be a ten or fifteen minute drive from the intersection to the farm.

Walley shrugged and stretched uncomfortably in the black Sunday suit. He felt sweat trickling down his armpits. Another half-hour and he would smell like a paper mill.

Across the road in the first quadrant of the intersection was a small country store. A sign above the door read KLEPPERS. The sign letters were blocked in maroon and decorated with an intertwining pansy of violet and green. Walley decided a candy bar and pepsi would make his waiting easier.

The pansy was reproduced in miniature on the globes of the two gas pumps in front of the store. The pumps were rusty and padlocked. The globe nearest Walley was cracked and it seemed to grin as he passed by.

The store was locked up tight. Walley realized that today was Wednesday. But why should a country store close on Wednesday afternoon? He had never understood why the stores in Hokes Bluff observed this mysterious lull. He peered in the front door window and saw an old white haired gentleman behind the counter. Walley banged on the door and shouted, thinking the old man might know the direction of Uncle Fred's farm. The old man did not respond. He remained motionless behind the counter, smiling amiably. Walley took his handkerchief and daubed some of the dust from the window. Another inspection of the store interior revealed that the old man was a picture on a snuff advertisement. Beside the snuff poster a huge, blond-haired baby girl bit into a slice of bread.

Walley banged his suitcase into the gravel. He turned an empty Dr. Pepper crate on one end and sat down. Certainly Uncle Fred might have mixed up his time of arrival. Or there might be car trouble. He might have confused his days. Walley's ears twitched at this possibility. He picked up some gravel and tossed it at the Boaz sign across the road.

The expanse of open field around him was edged by barbed wire fence. Many of the fence posts were leaning or down, the rusty wire tangled and rolled. Beyond the wire the fields extended to low hills, scraggy clumps of hedge, or continued uninterrupted for miles.

Across the road to his right, and slightly behind him, Walley saw a large two story house. Its presence startled him.

Obviously he had somehow overlooked the house during his prefunctory survey, or the house had simply materialized. Walley grinned at this thought. Suddenly everything looked better. These people would surely know Uncle Fred.

The rural mailbox read "KLEPPER", evidently the proprietor of the store. On impulse Walley checked inside but the box was empty.

A wheel-less green automobile sat on bricks in a corner of the yard. Walley recognized it as a Hudson Hornet. The words "GREEN AVENGER" were painted on the driver's door in silver paint.

A flurry of feathers and squawks burst from beneath the car. A big white chicken scurried across Walley's path. It paused long enough to cock a malevolent red eye toward Walley, then ran squawking out into the fields.

Walley thumped his suitcase down on the long narrow front porch and rapped on the screen door. He waited a while, then repeated his knock with more vigor. No one came to the door.

There was hardly a more mature boy of eighteen in Hokes Bluff. But this Wednesday run of bad luck had begun to strain his confidence. It seemed doubly unfortunate that all this should occur on his first adventure. He leaned against the porch banister and attempted to compose his thoughts.

The sky had lost its copper sheen and gradually darkened. Within the blackest clouds a yellow wash formed an

ominous eye. The sky looked like a gigantic bruise, and the enveloping space, the empty landscape, even the house seemed to brood. Walley felt an odd sense of expectation, a tenseness which bothered him. Ordinarily he was not given to such apprehension, but there was so much that seemed changed today.

He decided that a telephone was his best chance for finding help. He would have to call his mother. Uncle Fred could not abide telephones. They made him nervous and gave him hives.

Of course Walley could thumb a ride, . . . if any cars ever passed. But there were three possible directions. Walley imagined himself getting into a car and saying "Uncle Fred's chicken farm please."

Clearly the approaching storm would not be long in breaking. Walley tried to open the front door of the house. It yielded and he entered.

IV

There was no furniture in the house, and no people. The hardwood floors were waxed and polished to a brilliant luster. Walley could see a distortion of his face in the shine. His footsteps vibrated through the empty rooms and hallways as he explored the downstairs. As he moved from room to room he experienced the odd sensation of being watched. Several times he turned quickly, expecting to catch his hidden observer, but each time the room or hall was vacant.

Once he thought he detected a movement from the corner of his eye, but it proved to be his own reflection in the hardwood door-trim.

He paused at a front window. The weather had festered; the yellow eye in the thunder heads had expanded and looked ulcerous. A light, fitful rain spattered against the glass, offering no relief to the tension. Walley suddenly remembered a day, seven years before, when a tornado ripped into McDonnells Chapel, caroming back and forth through the valley, until it leveled the town, and killed thirty people. A picture came to Walley's mind, the news photograph of the York twins. Two pretty girls skewered neatly through their throats by a long wooden sliver of door moulding. The children were spitted like fruit. Walley swallowed and fingered his neck.

"It came down that valley like a ball of fire," Reverend Morton had said in the paper. "Roared through like God almighty and all the fiery angels." The people around Hokes Bluff dug storm cellars and mended their ways.

Walley continued through the house, still hoping to find a phone. He discovered a bathroom and felt an urge to urinate. The bathroom was tiled in dark burgandy, and the plastic toilet seat matched the tile. The room was very clean and looked new. It smelled slightly of antiseptic.

When Walley unzipped his fly and raised the toilet lid he saw the papier-mache ball floating in the toilet bowl.

He shook the water from the ball and turned it over, inspecting every irregular curve. He sensed that this soggy ball would reveal to him the hidden antagonist, the source of his "being watched" feeling. He began to peel away the papier-mache, oblivious to the rather sudden intensity of the storm outside the house.

The papier-mache enveloped a sky-blue rubber ball, about the size of a baseball. There was a seam in the ball, indicating that the ball was hollow. A strip of scotch tape joined the rubber halves. Walley slit the tape with his thumbnail and pulled the ball apart.

The bottle was brown, obviously an old pill bottle. Walley held it close to his right eye and detected movement inside the glass. He unscrewed the bottle cap and saw the ants squirming. Many were dead, but hundreds lived and they began waving their antennae and scrambling toward the opening. Walley stood transfixed until the first red ant scurried up his wrist. He yelled and dropped the bottle into the toilet, scattering clots of frantic ants into the white water. Then he ran into the hallway and collided with a wall. Dazed, he stumbled up a flight of stairs.

V

He stood in a master bedroom. In a corner of the room a huge canopied bed, neatly made, covered by a beautiful white silk bedspread. Embroidered in the center of the bed a violet

pansy. Walley ran his trembling hand across the smooth silk, and touched the pansy with his fingertips. For a moment he considered lying down and resting. As he reached for one of the bedpillows he noticed an edge of cardboard. Again he felt the odd thrill of anticipation, a mingling of anxiety and curiosity.

He pulled the object from beneath the pillow. A trick picture postcard, a three dimensional illusion of a man and woman fornicating. When the card was tipped the man's ass heaved and the woman's fingers flexed into the man's back. Walley was fascinated by the card. He checked around the room to satisfy his suspicion that someone lurked behind the bed, or perhaps the door. Then, as he slipped the picture into his inner coat pocket, he heard the menacing sound, a low rumbling like distant thunder. Walley recognized the sound and cursed himself for being diverted. Quickly he ran down the stairs and out of the house, forgetting his suitcase on the front porch.

He saw it rise from the north, topping a low ridge. The rumble had become a harsh whine. In his memory Walley heard sharp explosions, saw buildings and homes collapse.

A hundred yards from the house the funnel drew itself to an awesome height and paused, its middle flicking and twitching. The tornado seemed to gloat and tease its prey. Trees leaped skyward, dangling long thick roots.

As Walley turned to run he saw the bus, bobbing and twisting in the cloud. It turned lazily end over end, then whipped into a mad spin. It passed near enough to the house for him to recognize the skinny negro. The talkative man hung halfway out a open window and his long arms flailed wildly.

Walley could see a long centipede scar that bisected the negro's chest. When the skinny man saw Walley his eyes widened in hostile accusation. Walley could also see that, although the bus driver had lost his special hat, he still clung grimly to the steering wheel.

Towering above the house the twister performed a strange courting dance. The house became responsive; its walls trembled in anticipation. The twister plunged into the house and fragments of the bed squirted from the upstairs window. The walls folded and the house was consumed. The cloud began to move again, shaking the earth for miles.

Walley reached the highway and made south toward Hokes Bluff. As he ran his black Sunday suit flapped like wings. The twister reached the highway, seemed to hesitate, then turned south, pursuing Walley along the blacktop. The funnel gained velocity and hurled fencepost, rocks and small trees through the air. The debris rained about Walley and he lengthened his stride.

Sifting through his immediate terror and the roar of the tornado, came the realization that he had lost his mother's

only suitcase, and that she might find the stolen postcard. Then, behind him, Walley heard the honking of a bus horn.

It was too much for his first trip and his scream rose into the cluttered air and was sucked into the masticating cloud.